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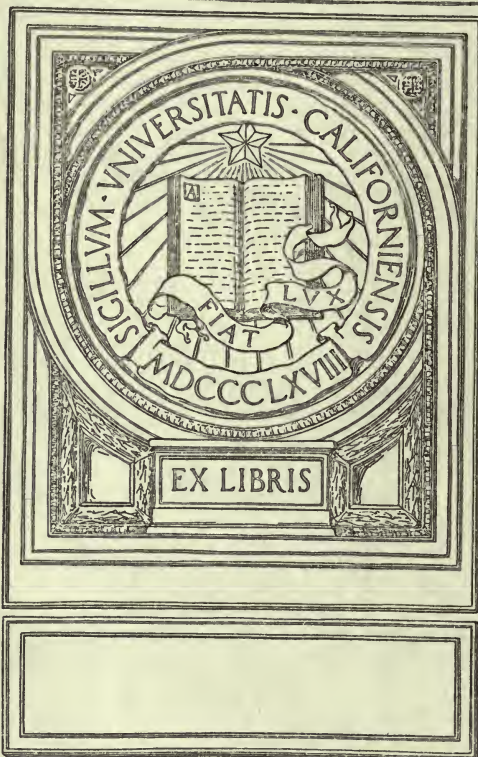
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GIFT OF
Prof. Emanuel Fritz



Emanuel Fritz

THE LIFE AND SERVICES

OF
EZRA CORNELL

BY
FRANCIS M. FINCH



UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA
THE LIFE AND SERVICES

OF

EZRA CORNELL

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY ON FOUNDER'S
DAY (JANUARY 11TH, 1887)

BY

FRANCIS M. FINCH

Judge of the Court of Appeals of the State of New York

PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSITY

1887

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Gift of Professor Emmanuel Fritz

Ladies and Gentlemen :

I have come among you to-day from a sense of duty which I found it impossible to resist. Since it was my fortune to be one of those who watched at the cradle of the University,—sometimes when the nights were dark, and enemies gathered and danger approached in the shadows,—and to stand by the side of the Founder, giving such help as occasion permitted or anxiety prompted, it seems appropriate that those memories of his life which I may have unconsciously stored away, whether familiar to the many or known only to the few, should have the repetition of this memorial occasion, or the preservation of such record as it is yet possible to make.

At that commemoration which, in the beginning of the last November, gathered about Cambridge loving sons and admiring friends to look back upon two hundred and fifty years of educational life, the thoughtful and polished orator of the festival could do no more for the memory of John Harvard than to speak of him in a passing sentence as “ the gentle and godly youth from whom we took our name,—himself scarce more than a name”. For us, there is not yet the excuse of long and blinding years, and a memory faded till its colors are lost in the gray of a mist; and something more than a name was our dead Founder’s gift. Surely, before the added years build other barriers between us and him, the solid strength and merit of his life should be remembered and recalled: and to that purpose and that alone I devote the moments allotted me to-day.

However vain the wish, one cannot repress a longing that events might have been so ordained as to have given to his open and observant eyes a view of what has already been accomplished in the upbuilding of this University whose completion and success became the dominant purpose of his life. Doubtless, some such wish was often his. Once at least I traced its presence in an expression of momentary regret. I remember riding with him over these hills when but a single building was slowly rising, and our way led through tangled grass, over uneven ground, amid the stone and timbers of construction, and when, after some moments of silence, with a patient and far-off look in his eyes, he said that I was more fortunate than he, since I might reasonably expect to see how the scene would look after the changes of twenty-five years, while for him there was no such hope. Less than that quarter-century has gone and I can see the change; but I am sure that he saw it then. In that moment of thoughtful silence every building took its appointed place, and he counted them already by the score, and voices and footsteps broke the stillness of the fields. One may even imagine that in that vision of the future he saw the white helmets aligned for the drill of the afternoon, and heard the sound of bells as yet uncast from a tower not even planned. For more than any man I knew he took the future into his confidence and thought, and studied its far perspective while tracing the foreground of his immediate work. One can almost see the hope and the purpose shining out of his young eyes as he stood upon this very hill, after a long day's walk from the parental roof, and looked down upon the village that was to be his future home. One can see it again in his weary journeys through the South, and patient efforts among the farms of Maine. But it developed most rapidly when he became one of the pioneers in telegraph construction and staked his fortunes upon the result.

I have heard him tell the story; modestly, but with some pride in the triumph of his judgment, and when he thought the listeners needed the stimulus of the lesson: how capital shrank from the enterprise and cautiously refused its aid; how mistakes and imperfections discouraged those who believed; how the heavy pressure of debt brought with it the destructive energy of the law: how learned scientists warned off his wires from the house-tops as bringing danger of fire; how he slept on the floor by his batteries and lived upon a crust; how sickness came to the help of disaster, when health and strength were supremely needed; but how all the time he felt sure that the energy of the lightning would be tamed to steady and useful work, and the world have need of its marvellous power; and so persisted, through doubt and despair darkening all about him, until the results unfolded in success and brought him a fortune beyond his hopes and needs.

What he had done with the telegraph in his vigorous youth he thought could be repeated with railways in his ripening age. Two such enterprises, necessary as he believed for easy and convenient access to the University he had founded, were struggling for lack of means, and in danger of failure and complete dissolution. With his old-time courage and faith in the future, he took their burdens upon his shoulders, and put in peril the fortune he had so hardly won. When some of us were frightened and ventured to remonstrate, with unmoved serenity and amused wonder at our timidity and want of foresight, he answered with confident predictions, reasoning difficult to be resisted, and a faith that would have moved mountains. The roads were built. The bulk of his fortune was buried in the earth with their ties and spiked to the roadway with their rails. If I greeted one of them with a solid and resolute hatred whose embers are yet, perhaps, a little

warm in the ashes, because it invaded the college grounds, shredding their peace with its screaming whistles, breaking every promise of neatness and adornment, and threatening the native forest that none but a Vandal would disturb; because I saw how its multitudinous wants, like the arms of a devil-fish, were fastening upon every square inch of the Founder's confidence and trust; because I feared the coming of the wreckers with their syndicates and foreclosures and battered life-boats presaging disaster; at least I was not blind to the patient courage with which he faced the danger, or the marvellous faith that calmly awaited the ultimate results. As he saw the flood tide of his fortune climb the sands to his feet and lift above all dangerous bars and rocks without excitement, or wonder, or pulses jubilant and throbbing, so he beheld the ebb stripping bare the sands and gliding out to the sea of cut and embankment and culvert and bridge, without terror, without complaint, and looked forward with cheerful courage and unyielding faith to a successful and fortunate end.

Even the approaching steps of Death faltered and hesitated before the firmness of that courage and the serenity of that faith. I shall not soon forget an occasion when, on the banks of the Hudson, he made his appearance at the closing of a litigation in which the interests of the University were largely involved. He came pale, haggard, and weak, with an incessant and painful cough, in a storm of wind and rain that lent damp and chill to the air, and, declining to rest upon a lounge, sat severely upright through the work of the day, marking every word, but repressing every emotion, and giving no sign of the thought within. Some one, not meaning to be overheard, spoke of him in a low and sympathetic tone as a dying man. I thought the words did not reach him. The firm head did not stir; no muscle moved; the eyes looked out fearless;

no added pallor spread over his face. But some hours after, when we were alone together, he suddenly looked up and said ; "they need not think me a dying man. I shall live long enough yet to ward off all danger and earn another million of dollars to give to the University at home." It matters little to the wonder of his courage that the firm purpose failed and death interposed a final barrier, for out of the aching head of his sure and sagacious plans was yet to spring, as the Greek goddess came, more than the million that Death would not let him earn.

Such was the brave nature, the prophetic intelligence, the unfaltering faith that built itself into the foundations of your University. One would expect to see something of the characteristics of the Founder in the work of his hands, but in two directions his far-reaching courage and foresight were developed to even greater degree than in his personal and business enterprises. Hold up to the light and study that calm statement of his ; "I would found an Institution in which any person may find instruction in any study." The words are simple as was the Quaker way of his inheritance, but have a directness peculiarly his own, and a deliberate force in their wide and confident sweep.

"Any person :"—the rich perhaps, but the youth of humbler homes and narrower means assuredly and without fail : those training for the learned professions if they should choose, but at all events the workers of the world, the men of the compass and the sledge, of the engine and the plough : not merely the earnest and ambitious boy, but the girl as well in whose face the doors of equal education had long been scornfully shut. I am little likely to forget how those doors were opened ; and there entered in with startling promptness what is now commonly called Co-Education. When everything was new and order had scarcely tamed confusion ; when

* for young men we had scarcely room, and for young women none, there came one day a quiet girl, modest, but—dreadfully firm,—bringing with her the formal certificate of her School Commissioner entitling her to a State scholarship, and asking admission to the student ranks. We were face to face with the grave problem, suddenly, and unwarned. I was asked to study the law and see if the application could be rejected. Study the law!—There, on our very seal was graved the mandate of the Founder; there, in the statute itself was the broad authority admitting of no exception; and there stood the representative of her sex calmly putting our principles on trial. I was obliged to say that the right was hers, that the law gave it, and we could not refuse without some scorn of the Founder's purpose, and the peril of a statute violated and annulled. Yet it was sadly true that we had no place, no room for the girl who stood the champion of her sex, and dreaded thus and at once to settle the policy of the Institution: and so we met the emergency with the bland persuasions of one to whom nobody ever said "no" when "yes" was a possible answer; whom I am glad to see safe returned from his German gutturals and the growlings of the sea; the first President of the University; who met the lady with a frank admission of her right and a suave request clothed in the richest morocco binding of his tones, that she would wait till better preparation and fitter welcome could be given. Of course he conquered and she for the time withdrew; but the question came again and again, and "would not down" and we still pleaded want of adequate means, until one day there came another man, tall like the Founder and as firm and crisp as he, who quietly laid upon our table almost a quarter of a million of dollars saying; "I am tired of hearing that excuse: have you any other?" Reflection failed to substitute another, and so the doors

stood open wide,—the doors of the University, swinging at its main entrance and guarding its front, not merely those of some timid and tentative “Annex,”—and “any person” had liberty to pass their portals.

“In any study.”—There lay the foundation of what the Founder meant this Institution to be ; a University in the broadest and fullest sense of the term. Be sure that he did not underrate the meaning of the word, or imagine that he could build in his lifetime what could only grow with the sturdy slowness of an oak ; but the seed that he planted was mother of an oak, not germ of a sunflower. The magnitude of the building may not exceed the scope and strength of the foundations, but he laid them such that the outlying towers of distant centuries will find a solid masonry to uphold their walls. His own native tastes were toward Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts. He loved his farm and the spread of its wide fields, the fragrance of the clover and the gold of the ripening grain, the heavy fleeces of his sheep and the sedate walk of his cattle, the silence that was busy with growth and stealing on to blossom and fruit. Equally he loved all useful and ingenious mechanism, himself a natural mechanic and full of waiting resources. He could frame a house when a boy or build a mill when a man ; tunnel the rocks for a flume or open the highway for a wire ; invent a relay or plan an insulator. A college of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts would have come naturally from his hand, and he gave them liberal place with the aid of one who never yet has found the bottom of purse or plan ; but the Founder meant more than that ; meant a University that should gather in all Art and Science, all Letters and Learning, the whole wide range of human knowledge and attainment. And he meant it, not as a dream or a hope, but in that downright earnest which contemplated years of steady growth and a full develop-

ment to be reached long after his brain and hand could plan and toil no more.

To move along the lines of that growth with prudent but aggressive steps is the duty you have inherited from the purpose of the Founder. Slowly, perhaps, but steadily and symmetrically, you are to grow into what we all long to see, and what some older institutions of the land are vigorously striving to become, a true American University. Not some servile copy of a foreign original or bald effort to match an English or a German pattern; but a native and natural growth, with every fiber of which is entwined the national spirit and the national nerve. Prowling about our educational thinking there is sometimes a timid reverence for foreign and famous models, and a sentimental dread of other guidance than theirs, which hampers free and resolute action, and substitutes a hesitant and distrustful step for the strong, if perhaps unstately or even ragged, march of our Western civilization. Not undervaluing the lessons of successful example, not unwilling to learn what Time has surely taught, yet one thing we should always remember, that a University grows and is not made, and all vigorous growth, outside of the hot-house invalids, is growth in the open air, such as befits the climate and the soil, and is product of the native air and earth. The stunted pine of Greenland lifts to the mast of a man-of-war in our western groves, and the sweetest grape of southern France may prove tart and bitter on our colder slopes. The end of education is the same for all; the goal to be reached is one and unchangeable; but the American scholar must travel his own path, however dim the trail or few the blazed trees on his road, and not cry or wait for the lighted highways smoothed by the wheels of a thousand years. The true measure of a University is not the wealth of its endowment, the noise of its doctrines,

or the moss on its venerable shingles, but the sort of men it makes, and the complete and crowning American University will be that which turns out the noblest type of American man:—not merely venerated with a thin surface of Science, not simply polished with a film of Classical oil, but hard-wood and solid, all the way through, into whatever shape by choice or emergency it may in the end be carved.

It is surely your duty and is likely to be your fate to lead the advance in securing to education a greater breadth of opportunity, a wider freedom of attainment, and an impartial expansion of its range and usefulness; to be imitated at a respectful distance; and then perhaps ignored by some whose patrician blood has been warmed into courage by your success. You need not grieve. The experience is not uncommon. In many ways, and on many lines of action your Founder felt the cold scorn of those who fancied themselves his superiors, and the chilling doubt of others who thought him unpractical and visionary; but he never suffered either scorn or doubt to turn him from duty or impede his progress; and lived long enough at least to demonstrate the power of an intelligent faith backed by the courage of conviction.

Observe, too, how these qualities were developed in the agencies he employed. The remark has been often made that it was itself a marvellous display of courage and faith which in the heat of the civil war, when the life of the nation was at stake, could inspire its chosen representatives to devote to the use of the States for the purposes of education a liberal share of the public domain. To our own State was allotted the right to nearly one million of acres representing at the moment a market value of less than one million of dollars, and that steadily decreasing with relentless certainty and speed. In the judgement of the Founder an

immediate sale was a terrible waste, and the location of the scrip and its sturdy holding full of tempting possibilities. He looked forward as was his way. He saw the fever of war making room for the industry of peace; the tide of immigration penetrating anew the solitudes of the prairie and the forest; the axe gleaming at the base of the pines and the rivers running logs instead of billows, and wealth awaiting him who himself could dare to wait. Full of trust in the future he foresaw, he made with the State that courageous and almost dramatic contract by which he bound himself to purchase the entire right of the commonwealth, to select and locate the lands it represented, to pay the taxes, guard against trespasses, defend from fires, and in the end sell when values had strengthened, and then pay into the coffers of the State for the use of the University the entire net proceeds of the enterprise. For himself he reserved—the return of his own money with the interest upon it. Nothing for his toil, nothing for his risk, nothing for his burden, nothing for his marvellous energy and thrift! This man, who at the outset could give twenty-five thousand dollars for the precious privilege of giving away half a million more, puts himself under bonds to the State to work for the State and ask no compensation! It was not wonderful that the load grew heavy as the slow years dragged on with no sign of reward; no wonder that when a moderate, but as the times were, just and fair price was offered for a portion of the land, those of us who were nearest to him begged his acceptance of the offer as a measure of prudence and safety; but it was wonderful how the iron grain of his courage and faith resisted far into the night the pleading and anxious fears of those whom he loved and trusted, grimly smiling at our weak hearts and frightened nerves, and insisting that he could carry the burden to the end.

I have sketched one side of our Founder's character. If I left it here you would see him imperfectly, as many saw him in his life; a tall, strong man with a grave stern face, reticent, and almost cold in his manner, looking at you with eyes of deliberate blue, steady beneath a brow unfurrowed and framed in by the gathering gray of hair as determined as his will. To a stranger, sometimes he seemed hard and repellant, likely to be proud, or to deal out rebuke with savage force. That was not in the least the man. No kinder heart than his ever beat, and it made him tender to distress and generous beyond measure: not merely on a large scale and in the public eye, but silently and in the shadow of his daily and private life. To relieve suffering, to lighten the burdens of poverty, to open the way to despairing effort, to instinctively find the need that pride concealed, to fill his days full of kindness and charity, was as natural to him as for the flowers to bloom or the corn to ripen. There are those now living, moving in the prime of life to assured success, to whose hopeless youth he opened the doors of hope, and paved and smoothed the road from the fortune he had gained. There are those now living, in the afternoon of life and awaiting the sunset, who owe to his tireless bounty the peace and comfort of their days. There are those who have gone before us whose last hours were cheered by his care, and who sleep, some within cannon range of the Potomac forts, and some on the hillside within the shadow of his new dwelling which shelters now surviving wife and children, but never covered as a home his own tired head. While writing these words an incident, unknown to me before, has been communicated by one whom many in this assemblage will remember with an esteem and regard as lasting as my own—the Reverend Doctor Torrey, who in the early days of the University was resident here as Pastor of the First Presbyterian

Church. He had been preaching to his congregation, among whom the Founder was an attentive listener, upon the duty of aiding young men of slender means who desired to enter the Ministry to secure the necessary and adequate education, and quoted the remark which happened to linger in his memory that "these were Poverty's jewels, taken in the rough and polished for the crown of Christ." At the close of the sermon a collection was had for the benefit of the Board of Education of the Church and among the gifts of money large and small was found a little card upon which and over his initials was pencilled in the Founder's hand; "Select for me one of Poverty's jewels that it may be wrought out—the diamond for the crown of Christ." When, after the selection was made, he was told the name of his jewel and the expense to be borne for seven years while its purity and light were being slowly developed, he simply said in his brief, terse way, "Right; I agree to that;" and silently fulfilled the promise till the need of it was ended. For any young man struggling to obtain an education his heart beat warmly and his help was never withheld.

No man was firmer in his friendships. His confidence once given was never withdrawn until hopelessly betrayed. Long after selfishness and greed had grown visible to other eyes they were unseen by him or softened by charitable interpretation, and he resented a suspicion of his friends as a personal injury to himself. If sometimes this firm and faithful trust took on the proportions of a fault, it was but a virtue carried to excess, reminding one of that other brave and self-reliant nature which led our armies to victory, and never could be made to see a vice or error in a friend.

But among the Founder's traits, what to me was the strangest of all in so strong and earnest a nature, was his serene patience and forgiving temper under

persistent and bitter falsehood, destructive and stinging slander, and a jealousy reckless of the truth. It seems almost impossible at this day and in the light of events that labors so unselfish and a life so stainless could have received for reward a storm of obloquy and abuse. I recall very clearly the occasion. It came with the solemnity of a formal accusation, upon the floor of the Legislature, from the lips of one of its members, and charged upon Ezra Cornell that his land enterprise was a gigantic fraud upon the State, planned and intended to win for him an enormous fortune and to plunder the Institution he had founded. Let us be just. He who made the charge doubtless believed its truth, and deemed that he was but doing his sworn duty. Yet at the time all of us flamed into anger and indignation. We gathered about the Founder with hot cheeks and eyes in a blaze and words stinging with rage and exasperation. His was the only quiet voice of all. I heard him say that what we so bitterly resented and roundly execrated was not at all an evil fortune but rather the reverse; and then he calmly explained, that the secret suspicion of a wrong and wicked purpose had long been mining beneath the surface and was difficult to discover and refute, but when it came openly to the light and found a man bold enough to declare it and be its champion the danger was ended, for it furnished an opportunity, by a formal investigation which he should at once demand, to turn the light on every step of his progress and convince the most doubtful of the simple truth. And this he said without anger or excitement, patiently confronting the wrong till the slander was laid in its grave. We who know that his fortune was lessened and perilled by the demands of the burden he assumed have little need at this day of speaking in his defence; and yet before my own lips are sealed and I follow him into the dark which I hope

but borders the light, I desire to say one thing with all the force and weight which it is possible for me to command. Day by day and almost hour by hour I became familiar with all that he planned and all that he did in the management of his self-imposed trust. None of his accounts or of his correspondence with his chosen agents were withheld from my scrutiny, and if ever man had a full and complete opportunity to find and know the uttermost truth, that opportunity was mine: and I am glad to declare that never, in word or deed, in act or intention, did I discover the least faint trace of a selfish purpose, or the shadow of a personal benefit sought or gained. Thoroughly and absolutely pure and without alloy was the true gold of his nature and his life.

But a time came when the Founder's work was ended. How he bore up against the waste of disease I have already said. I saw him climb the narrow stairways in the business quarter of the Metropolis, pausing many times from exhaustion, but with never a murmur or complaint. He who in his prime could walk forty miles a day and enjoy the effort found himself scarcely able to endure an hour's fatigue. There came at last the hardest trial of all, to unloose his hold upon the helm and commit the wheel to other hands. That he did it sadly, reluctantly, and with pain is most true, but he did it patiently and with unhesitating trust in his children and his friends. I recollect the shiver and the chill with which I became conscious of that first surrender. With one of his sons we were seeking safety from a menacing danger, and searching anxiously for a rift in the cloud or a light in the dense darkness, and he, folding his hands upon the table and laying his head upon them said only—"You must do the best that you can: I am not well!"—The words were simple, but how much they cost him we shall never know. From

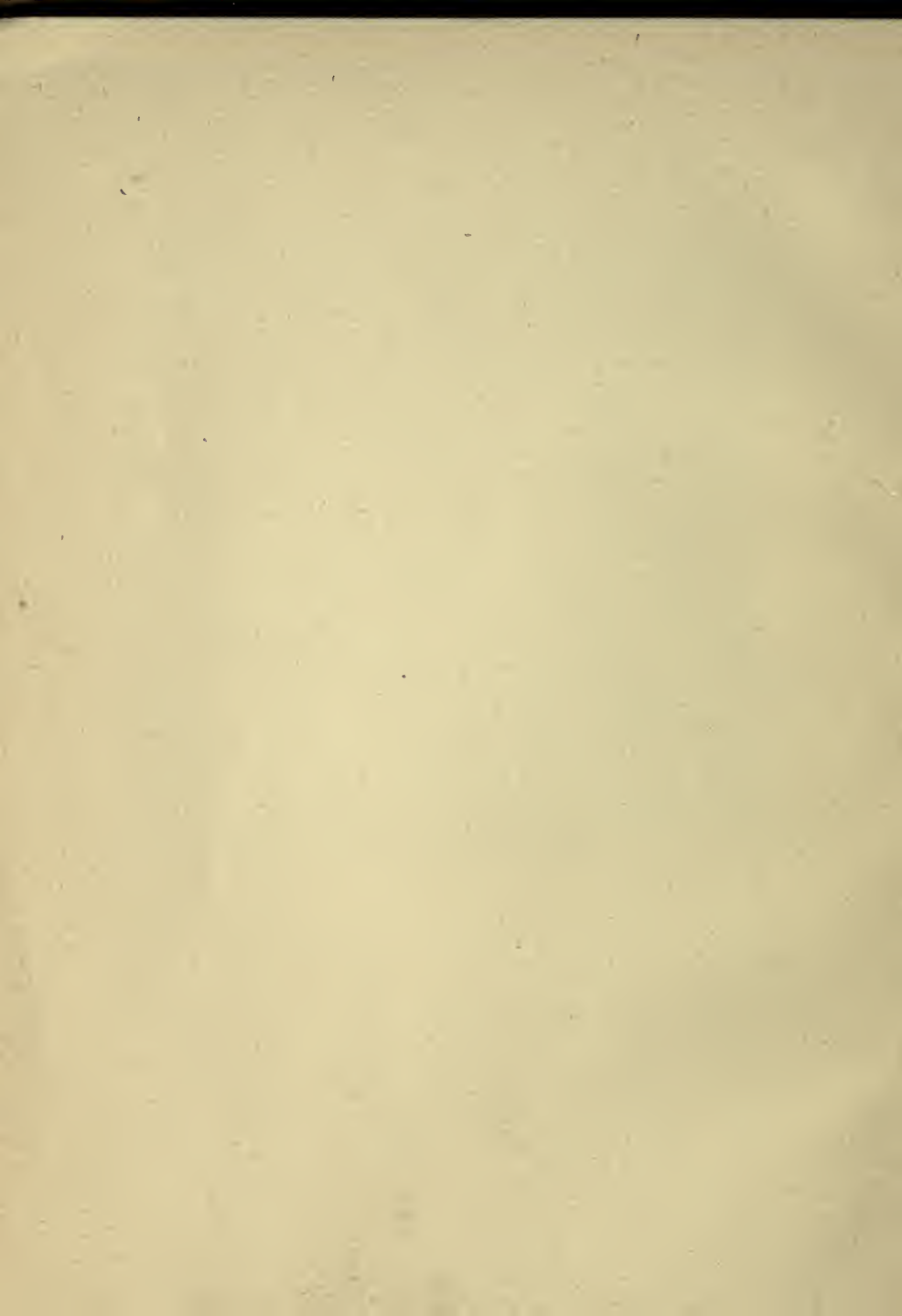
that time on, he grew steadily weaker, yet his patience and placid resignation continued to the end. It was my privilege with the aid of the Trustees, who generously lent their own means to the emergency until the land securities could come into effective use, and with the first Treasurer of the University who yet remains among us, with declining years as fruitful as they have been cheerful, to place in the Founder's hands as he sat in his sick room, every bond he had given the State, every obligation it held against him, and assure him that all his promises were fully and exactly fulfilled. He went to his death with his benevolent and marvellous Trust accomplished and complete.

And now, at last, you have placed his mortal remains where I know that he desired to sleep; on these hills where his youthful resolves were framed; on the fields of the farm that he loved as men love the air and leaves of home; in the midst of the University to which he literally gave his life. Generations of busy feet and throbbing hearts will flow like recurrent tides about his resting place, and changes most broad and unforeseen make all things but one grow unfamiliar. That one all change will reverence. Throughout the years his slumber shall have respect. Above his grave shall remain the marble, not more pure and not more firm than the purpose of his life, and from the stained windows through which the glory of the sunlight filters shall gravely look down the elder builders who pointed him the way; the form of one who worked and gave at his side; and the pure face of the maiden, who wove a thread of romance in the sterner work of father and of friend, and left us at least her love in the chimes she gave.

And there I must leave him; and here I must leave you to return to duties which are impatient of interruption. As I go permit me to add one final word.

I have thought that the duty which I owed to this occasion was not at all an effort of logic or of learning, if such were within my power; not even a defense of the New Education or a study of your relations to it, however I might love to break a lance in the fray; but an effort to paint a picture of the Founder as I knew him in his life, in outlines accurate and true, and in colors as vivid as I could find surviving among the dull browns of daily toil; in order that you who knew him not, who have come later upon the scene, may interweave among your younger labors and fresher ambitions the face and step of the grave but kindly man who made your places and your purposes possible; and in the hope that the story of his life may be handed down from one to another and never for a day be forgotten. I trust that through all vicissitudes and changes, however the New may supersede the Old, and Time and Death blur or efface the Past, there may yet remain, as the center of every aim and ambition, as the stimulus to every useful effort, as the atmosphere of the University, the memory of Ezra Cornell.









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